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ITEM 8:* THE ENVIRONMENT FUND, OTHER FINANCIAL MATTERS AND ADMINISTRATION

ON-SITE INTERPRETATION FACILITIES AT GIGIRI, NAIROBI

Report of the Executive Director

Summary

At its sixteenth session, convened in May 1991, the Governing Council in its decision 16/1, paragraph 6, requested the Executive Director to report to its seventeenth session on the feasibility of providing on-site interpretation at Gigiri, Nairobi. The present report, submitted in compliance with that request, begins with a review of interpretation trends within the United Nations system, followed by an analysis of the comparative costs of maintaining a team of staff interpreters in Nairobi to service UNEP meetings at its headquarters and elsewhere, vis-à-vis the continued employment of freelance interpreters; UNEP's own experience during 1991 and 1992, and its projections for 1993, and a number of proposals for the more efficient use of the time of staff interpreters. The report concludes with the suggestion that, for the time being, it is still more cost-effective for UNEP to continue to rely on freelance interpreters.

Suggested action by the Governing Council

The Governing Council may wish to:

1. *Take note* of the report of the Executive Director on on-site interpretation facilities at Gigiri, Nairobi.

2. *Request* the Executive Director to keep this matter under review and to report thereon to the Council if and when the provision of on-site interpretation facilities at Gigiri, Nairobi, becomes financially advantageous.

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* Refers to the number of the item on the Provisional Agenda (UNEP/GC.17/1).

Introduction

1. In its decision 16/1, paragraph 6, the Governing Council requested the Executive Director to report to it at its seventeenth session on the feasibility of providing on-site interpretation facilities at Gigiri, Nairobi. The present report is submitted in compliance with that request.

2. Interpreters have special workload standards which have been established over the years. A June 1974 United Nations Joint Advisory Committee report 1/ on the conditions of service of staff interpreters recommended that their normal workload should be not more than two meetings per day and not exceed seven meetings a week (a "meeting" is generally defined as a period of 2 1/2 to 3 hours from the time the interpreter is required to be on duty). Generally, all organizations of the United Nations system follow this norm. For freelance interpreters hired by the United Nations organizations the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) has established a normal workload as being not more than two meetings a day and, on average, not exceeding eight meetings during a seven-day week.

3. The six official languages of the United Nations are Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish. A typical meeting using the six official languages requires two interpreters each in the English, French, Russian and Spanish booths. The Arabic and Chinese booths require three interpreters per booth as in contrast to the other four booths, they work into and from their languages. Consequently, a team of interpreters required to service a six-language meeting could comprise 14 interpreters, as is the case with the meetings of the Committee of Permanent Representatives to UNEP. However, since most sessions normally involve at least 10 meetings per week, one additional interpreter per booth usually has to be recruited in order to conform with the workload standards, thus necessitating the recruitment of a team of at least 20 interpreters.

Interpretation Trends within the United Nations System

4. According to the 1986 Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) Report on the Management of Interpretation Services in the United Nations System, 2/, there were not enough qualified interpreters in the 1970s to service peak conference periods. Although more interpreters were available in the 1980s and 1990s, the difficulty lay in attracting them to regular employment within the United Nations system.

5. The same report states that the Specialized Agencies tend to rely predominantly on freelance interpreters, while the United Nations, which has a much bigger and more complex conference programme, primarily uses regular staff interpreters supplemented by freelance interpreters during peak periods. However, wide fluctuations in conference schedules tend to make a full-time workload for regular staff interpreters difficult to achieve, further affirming the benefits of using freelancers who are paid only for the days they are recruited, and who cost about $100 less per day on average system-wide.

6. As concerns the recruitment of regular staff interpreters, the Secretary-General in his report on the pattern of conferences 3/, submitted to the General Assembly at its forty-seventh session, states that it is difficult to fill vacancies, partly because the present system of recruitment through world-wide competitive examinations is slow, and partly because the freelance market is now more attractive. According to the 1986 JIU report, problems also exist in finding certain regular staff interpreters with the required language combinations.

Cost of Permanent Interpreters versus Freelance Interpreters

7. According to the 1986 JIU report, an inter-agency analysis in 1974 determined that there was a "quite clear" tendency for costs to decrease as the proportion of freelance interpreters increased. The report further indicated that in 1984-1985 the system-wide cost per freelance interpreter day was $267, as opposed to $363 per regular staff interpreter day.

8. According to the same report, the relative cost advantage of using freelance interpreters could be attributed to the following:

(a) Freelance interpreters are paid only for the days for which they are recruited. Regular staff interpreters, however, are paid a year-round salary, whether they are assigned to a meeting or not;

(b) Freelance wage rates established in the agreement with AIIC make freelancers somewhat cheaper than regular staff, since the freelance rates do not include certain benefits paid to regular staff such as full pension contributions, annual "step" increments, home leave, maternity leave, dependency allowances, education grants, etc;

(c) When organizations provide interpretation services for conferences and meetings held away from their headquarters travel and per diem costs can become a significant portion of total interpretation costs. Considerable savings can therefore be made by hiring qualified freelancers at the meeting's location, rather than deploying regular staff interpreters from headquarters.

The UNEP Experience

9. UNEP has no staff interpreters at present and recruits freelancers to service its meetings convened at headquarters. Only three freelance interpreters who meet United Nations requirements for a six-language meeting are domiciled in Nairobi at present. Generally, freelancers are recruited from the nearest location to the meeting, e.g. Cairo, Lusaka, Harare, and various locations in Europe and elsewhere.

Experience in 1991

10. Out of the 220 working days in a year, UNEP used freelance interpreters for 74 calendar days of six-language interpretation for its meetings. Of these 74 calendar days, only 47 calendar days of meetings were convened in Nairobi, most of the balance of 27 calendar days represented meetings held in Geneva for which, in the interests of

economy, locally domiciled interpreters were recruited. The approximate total cost of the 47 days of freelance interpretation at Nairobi, including salaries, travel and daily subsistence allowance (DSA) was $1,346,400.

11. For purposes of comparison, had UNEP had its own team of 20 regular staff interpreters to service those 47 calendar days of meetings convened in Nairobi, the approximate yearly cost to the organization of maintaining that team would have been $1,620,000 (approximate yearly cost to the organization of one P-4 level interpreter in 1991, if based in Nairobi = $81,000).

12. It is important to note that none of the meetings covered by those 47 calendar days of interpretation could have been fully serviced by only one team of 20 regular staff interpreters; an additional 61 freelance interpreters would have been needed to supplement the regular team at an estimated cost of $500,000 over and above the $1,620,000, bringing the approximate total cost of interpretation to $2,212,000.

13. As indicated above, UNEP utilized 27 calendar days of six-language interpretation for meetings convened in Europe (17 days in Geneva and 10 days in Madrid) for which, to the extent possible, either permanent United Nations interpreters were used in Geneva or locally domiciled freelance interpreters were recruited at an approximate cost of $300 per day per interpreter. Had UNEP sent its own team of regular staff interpreters to service those meetings, it would have saved approximately $300 per day per interpreter in salaries, but would have had to budget for the cost of air fares to and from Europe for those staff, plus the cost of DSA and terminal expenses payable to staff on mission. Depending on the length of the meeting, some savings might have been made by sending a team of regular interpreters from Nairobi to Geneva or elsewhere in Europe although, given the cost of air fares, that would only have been cost-effective if the team were to service a meeting of at least 10 days duration. It should also be noted that two of the three meetings covered by the 27 calendar days of six-language interpretation could not have been fully serviced by one team of 20 regular staff interpreters. Additional freelance interpreters would have been needed to supplement the team.

Experience in 1992

14. For its meetings, UNEP used freelance interpreters for 62 calendar days of six-language interpretation. Of those 62 calendar days, only 28 days of meetings were convened in Nairobi, most of the balance representing meetings held in Geneva. The approximate total cost of those 28 days of freelance interpretation in Nairobi, including salaries, travel and DSA, was $1,397,100.

15. For purposes of comparison, had UNEP had its own team of 20 regular staff interpreters to service those 28 calendar days of meetings convened in Nairobi, the approximate yearly cost to the organization of maintaining that one team of interpreters would have been $1,760,000 (approximate yearly cost to the organization of one P-4 level interpreter in 1992, if based in Nairobi = $88,000).

16. Three of the five meetings covered by the 28 calendar days of interpretation were one-day meetings of the Committee of Permanent Representatives to UNEP. The other two meetings could not have been fully serviced by one team of 20 regular staff interpreters, and an additional 76 freelance interpreters would have been needed to supplement the regular team at an estimated cost of $800,000 over and above the $1,760,000, bringing the approximate total to $2,560,000.

17. During 1992, UNEP utilized 34 calendar days of six-language interpretation for meetings convened in Geneva and elsewhere (20 days in Geneva, 9 days in Copenhagen, and 5 days in Piriapolis, Uruguay) for which to the extent possible, either United Nations staff interpreters were used in Geneva or locally domiciled freelance interpreters were recruited at an approximate cost of $400 per day per interpreter. In the case of Copenhagen, as there were no locally domiciled freelance interpreters who met the United Nations requirements for a multilingual meeting, all freelance interpreters were recruited from Geneva and elsewhere in Europe. In the case of Uruguay, locally domiciled freelance interpreters were recruited to the extent possible, supplemented by freelance interpreters from New York and Geneva. Again, some savings might have been made by sending a team of regular interpreters from Nairobi particularly as three of the meetings represented by those 34 calendar days were of 10 days duration.

Forecast for 1993

18. At the time of preparing the present paper, UNEP has only 12 calendar days of meetings with six-language interpretation confirmed for Nairobi during 1993, with the possibility of an additional 12 calendar days of meetings with six-language interpretation scheduled for Nairobi or elsewhere later in the year. The United Nations will convene 12 calendar days of meetings with six-language interpretation in Nairobi during March/April 1993, and the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) will convene 10 calendar days of meetings with six-language interpretation in Nairobi in April/May 1993, i.e. a total of 34 calendar days of meetings with six-language interpretation confirmed for Nairobi at present.

Cost-saving Methods

19. One possible way of making better use of the time of staff interpreters during periods when there are no meetings could be to employ them as translators during such periods. In general, however, according to the 1986 JIU report this is a staffing pattern which almost all agencies try to avoid, generally arguing that the skills and temperament needed are so different that the two functions cannot be successfully combined. More important, however, the peak workload periods for translators and interpreters are during meetings, and if staff translators are assigned as interpreters during those periods, replacement translators have to be recruited to fill the gaps.

20. Another cost-saving mechanism of particular relevance to UNEP is to arrange to convene major United Nations meetings back-to-back at the same venue. In this way considerable budgetary savings can be achieved as the travel costs are shared by the organizations concerned. This is particularly relevant for meetings convened in Nairobi, especially the

one-day meetings of the Committee of Permanent Representatives to UNEP, as the approximate cost of a single Geneva-Nairobi round-trip ticket is US$3,000.

21. During 1991 and 1992, efforts were made to convene United Nations meetings in Nairobi back-to-back with major UNEP meetings, utilizing as far as possible the same interpreters. Examples of such meetings were the first substantive session of the Preparatory Committee for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, and the session of the United Nations Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee for a Framework Convention on Climate Change, which were convened in conjunction with major UNEP meetings during 1991 and 1992 respectively. In 1993, the fourteenth session of the Commission on Human Settlements and the seventeenth session of the UNEP Governing Council will be convened back-to-back in Nairobi, and both secretariats are making every effort to utilize the same interpreters for both meetings.

22. Naturally, efforts to convene meetings back-to-back require considerable forward planning. Unfortunately, this is not always possible, given the heavy workloads of the United Nations organizations, their uneven and constantly changing meeting schedules coupled with a concentration of conferences and meetings at certain periods of the year, and the uneven distribution pattern of meetings throughout the year and throughout the system.

23. UNEP has also looked into the possibility of inter-organizational cooperation between UNEP and the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and the Organization for African Unity (OAU), Addis Ababa, with a view to utilizing a joint team of interpreters who could service the meetings of each of the three organizations, whether in Nairobi or in Addis Ababa.

24. ECA does not have a team of permanent interpreters and relies on freelancers, as does UNEP. OAU does have a team of permanent interpreters but, owing to the unpredictable nature of its work, it is unable to guarantee the secondment of any of its staff at any given time and often has to supplement its own requirements by recruiting freelancers. Additionally, both ECA and the OAU work primarily in French and English and occasionally in Arabic. This would not solve UNEP's interpretation problems insofar as Chinese, Russian and Spanish are concerned.

Conclusion

25. Should a decision be taken to provide on-site staff interpretation at Gigiri, Nairobi, one team of 20 regular staff interpreters would in most instances be adequate only to service the one-day meetings of the Committee of Permanent Representatives to UNEP. To provide interpretation for a one-week session, with two simultaneous meetings morning and afternoon for five days, at least two teams of regular staff interpreters would have to be recruited. These two teams would still have to be supplemented by freelance interpreters on occasion, particularly for major sessions requiring night and weekend meetings, and when meetings overlap, an occurrence which is becoming more and more frequent given the increasing number of meetings now being convened under the newly established trust funds.

26. In conclusion, the current situation in UNEP would suggest that given the limited number of days of six-language interpretation currently called for at Nairobi, and until more multilingual meetings can be attracted to Nairobi, for the time it is being still more cost-effective for the organization to continue to rely on freelance interpreters rather than create 20 additional posts for regular staff interpreters.

Notes

1/ JIU/REP/74/4.

2/ JIU/REP/86/5.

3/ A/47/336.